

## "All the stairways were open"

At 6:20 am the fire started to subside. Heavy smoke conditions continued until about noon. The wood and stucco light well walls had collapsed and the exterior brick walls were bowed in several places. Protected by the water from the exterior hose streams, the rooms on the perimeter of the building were reasonably intact structurally. Very little damage had occurred in the first-story commercial area. The lobby of the hotel had been heavily involved, but some of the records at the desks were salvageable.

Eight task forces, consisting of eight two-piece engines, four triples, and eight truck companies with 20 officers and 100 men were used to attack the fire. Additional apparatus and personnel were required for lighting and patrolling. Fourteen men handled the injured in seven Fire Department ambulances.

The building was structurally unsafe, so the owner contracted to have it razed. As it was being demolished the Fire Department continued to search for fatalities. The search turned up 19 victims in all; 18 apparently had died of smoke inhalation, and one had jumped from the fourth story shortly after the Fire Department arrived.

An accurate count is impossible, but 60 to 80 people were rescued over ladders by the Fire Department during the first 21 minutes after fire fighters arrived. Fire Department personnel transported 25 injured people to various area hospitals.

Fire officials believe the fire had been set in the laundry storage area. The chimney effect of the vents and the open stairs accounts for the rapid spread, in which occupants found themselves trapped. The stairs and corridors could not be used for escape or for rescue



*Two entrances to two apartments in a typical corridor. The space between the ceiling joists was open to the vertical vents.*

because of the heavy smoke. Flames coming from the lobby entrance engulfed one of the fire escapes, rendering it useless. With the corridors untenable, access to the fire escapes was cut off. All these conditions, along with the delay in reporting, allowed the fire to advance before the arrival of fire fighters.

## *The Ozark Hotel*

*This fire, in Seattle, Washington, was similar to the Los Angeles fire. Again, open stairways were the culprit.*

From a report submitted by the Seattle Fire Department

**A**NOTHER FIRE, ALSO OF INCENDIARY ORIGIN, occurred in Seattle, Washington, on March 20, 1970. This fire took 20 lives.

**T**HE BUILDING, constructed about 60 years ago, was five stories high. The walls were of reinforced concrete,

the floors and roof of wood. The ground floor had several commercial establishments and covered an area of 4,200 square feet. The hotel portion of the building contained 60 rooms. There were two open stairways originating on the ground floor and terminating at the fifth story.



AN ENGINE COMPANY HAD JUST FINISHED extinguishing a rubbish fire when a passer-by indicated there was a fire in a nearby hotel. It was 2:40 am. The fire fighters could see smoke above the roofs of the surroundings buildings. As they responded they requested a full assignment. The dispatcher had just received a phone call concerning the fire and was dispatching the proper assignment when the engine company called by radio. Four engines, two ladders, and two chiefs responded on the first alarm.

The men on the first engine arrived to find victims lying on the sidewalk and hanging from windows on all floors. The lobby and central stairways appeared to be fully involved. A second alarm was immediately transmitted.

Rescue operations were hampered by the number of people hanging from windows and the magnitude of the fire by the time fire fighters arrived. Ladders were used to rescue terrified occupants from upper-story windows. Many occupants could not wait to be rescued and jumped.

Large supply lines were put into operation as additional apparatus arrived. Hand lines were advanced to attack the flames wherever possible. Lines could be moved inside only to the second story, because the stairs above the second story had been badly damaged by the fire. As the fire fighters on the lines found hotel occupants they directed or carried them from the building. After initial entry had been made from the outside, lines were run from the building's standpipe.

When evacuation and rescue operations had nearly been completed master stream appliances were put into operation. Three ladder pipes were operated for some time, along with many 2½-inch hand lines.

When the fire had been extinguished an investigation revealed it was of incendiary origin. Two almost simultaneous fires had been started with flammable liquids in the two stairways. Because there was no night clerk on duty and because there was no automatic fire protection, the fire quickly spread throughout the building, rendering the corridors and stairways useless for evacuation. As a result 20 occupants perished, either from smoke inhalation or from injuries suffered when they jumped from the upper stories.

INCENDIARY FIRES LIKE THESE are very difficult to prevent; but proper construction practices and automatic fire protection could have prevented such tragic results.

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*One of the stairways in the Ozark Hotel.* SEATTLE Times

every reason to devote attention to training those who need to know fire laws and enforcement.

#### Conclusion

We hear much criticism of the ills and injustices of our society. Some say: "*The system is all wrong.* Too much tax money spent on public and private protection. It would be cheaper and more sensible just to save lives and let buildings burn." Others say: "Too many rules, overlapping jurisdictions — cut down on the rules and the laws. Give us more freedom."

A laissez-faire philosophy, I am convinced, is foolhardy and destructive. I favor laws requiring a safe minimum of fire prevention construction, fire prevention practices, and fire protection equipment and devices.

We must fight for the best possible means of enforcement. Why? *Because* we know man is prone to err. He soon forgets a fire disaster. His attention is quickly channeled away to high hopes of quick gain. Codes and guidelines have little influence. Experience has proved that man needs a framework of laws and rules to keep fire from destroying him, and to keep him from destroying others through mistakes with fire.

What people do not know about fire laws and fire prevention enforcement may not hurt them. It can kill them. Enforcement means *doing something* about fire dangers. In the field of influencing people it's not what you *say* but what you *do* that counts.

AUSTIN E. BRIDGES  
Fire Commissioner, Province of Alberta

#### Two Fatal Hotel Fires (continued from page 38)

In each case properly enclosed noncombustible stairways would have contained the fire, allowing fire fighters more time to rescue the occupants. Automatic detection would have alerted the authorities sooner, eliminating the delay in reporting the fire. Automatic sprinklers would have controlled the fire before it grew to any considerable magnitude.

Fire prevention personnel should make a concerted effort to locate and eliminate all the potential death traps in their jurisdictions. In those buildings having substandard construction automatic protection should be required. Open stairways should be enclosed and equipped with self-closing doors to prevent spread of smoke and fire. △

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I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete.

*Charles I. Babcock*